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# The Interview: A Tool for Peacebuilding? Reflections on the *Peace Process: Layers of Meaning* Project



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"Only Connect".

E.M. Forster's view of the human mission – our fundamental obligation – is thus captured in the epigraph to *Howards End*.

This is in many ways what we set out to do in the *Peace Process: Layers of Meaning* project - to use the interview as a tool with which to connect people to their past and to one another. This three year initiative was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (Peace III Programme) and involved collaboration between Queen Mary, University of London, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Trinity College Dublin.<sup>1</sup> In this short article I reflect on some of the connections that were made across three jurisdictions and on the ways in which these relate to the cause of peacebuilding.

The project had a number of distinct elements but our efforts cohered quite powerfully around the interview. We conducted more than one hundred lengthy interviews ourselves; we trained people in how to interview and in how to train others to do it; we used interviews to create lasting resources – booklets, films and online tools; and we reflected on our methods – what works, difficulties and dangers, and key questions which must be answered before you even think of setting out.

## Heritage Archive

Our primary objective was to create an oral archive of the Peace Process. We used the word 'heritage' because we considered it a matter of national and international importance to preserve the accounts of witnesses to some of the most traumatic and significant events in Anglo-Irish history. That a vacuum and keen sense of loss arises from deaths of eye-witnesses was underlined in recent years with the passing away of the last veterans of World War One. There was indeed a sense of urgency about this

<sup>1</sup> The Project Director, Professor Seán McConville, worked from a base in London and I – as Project Co-Director – was based at Trinity College Dublin. Our main project office was located at Dundalk Institute of Technology. Here Margaret Andrews worked as Project Manager and Sarah Lorimer fulfilled the role of Research Officer. Dr Darragh Gannon took charge of the LOMOND directory. Colleagues at Queen Mary, University of London and other part-time staff assisted with the administration of the project.

work: a number of key witnesses passed away as we developed the proposal. Other obituaries followed by the week.

### **Defining the Peace Process**

The Peace Process is often understood in terms of the few short years leading up to the Good Friday Agreement, the accord itself, and a succession of postscripts. But there was nothing inevitable about this transition. Recording the complex, contested and frequently elusive nature of its roots demanded that we go right back to the O'Neill-Lemass exchanges of the mid-60s and consider those initiatives that ended unsatisfactorily or inconclusively. Behind the scenes, each offers some insight into process and the commitment of individuals and groups, as well as underlying hopes for change. We aimed to go as far back as living memory allowed, including the views and perspectives of those who were once household names but now long since forgotten.

With a clutch of about thirty interviews under our belt we stopped to take stock. The review was instructive. Our sample – mainly senior politicians and policy makers in Dublin, Belfast and London – was inevitably male-dominated and more or less confined to the corridors of power. To further interrogate and question our understanding of the Peace Process we took to the streets of Dundalk and Belfast and asked passers-by what they understood by peace. Their views were condensed into a short film (What Does Peace Mean to You - [www.peaceprocesshistory.org](http://www.peaceprocesshistory.org)) and served as a timely reminder that the final stages in any peace process must be about community and personal transformation.

From that point on we began to prioritise the accounts of a much wider range of citizens. We asked them to explain from their unique perspective what it was like to want peace, to be denied peace, to experience peace and yet to crave for peace. This was not to gainsay the courage and leadership shown by politicians and senior officials but simply to acknowledge that peace-making cannot be confined to the political sphere. Our new categories included the bereaved and the damaged, clergy, those who came early and late to peace, Jeremiahs and enthusiasts, irreconcilables, former paramilitaries, and members of frontline services. To this we added categories such as sport, the arts, health, and trades unions. Of particular interest were the accounts of those who had a bird's-eye view of divided communities – the midwife, the street sweeper, the GP, the publican and the undertaker.

It is in many ways an impertinence to invite someone to give up several hours of their time and to let you into their life. And it is not always easy to engage in a frank discussion about one's past. Many were speaking for the first time about the impact of peace and conflict on their lives. It can take considerable bravery to do so and it takes more skill than you might imagine truly to listen and to help draw out recollections and reflections.

And yet we were struck again and again by the significance of providing such opportunities for measured reflection. Not all interviewees played an active or remarkable role in their field – some were mere onlookers or bystanders – and yet their lives had been shaped and deeply affected by the conflict. I spoke to a fireman who pulled human remains from the scene of a bomb, transported a dying woman to hospital, and then returned home to pick up the milk bottles and lay the table for breakfast. There was no counselling, no debriefing, just the memory of a cold and dark February morning. We interviewed a small businessman about his struggle to survive in spite of racketeering and threats to the lives of his workmen; a mother talked about the challenge of raising five children whilst her husband served out a lengthy sentence; a little known nun recounted tireless and anonymous work behind the scenes: creating space, listening, breaking down barriers, and praying for peace. We are all well aware of the dangers of overlooking or silencing people. All too often in the past chronic pinpricks of frustration and resentment have festered and fast-simmered into violent conflict. But the less extreme social ills borne of social withdrawal and isolation should not be overlooked.

The border poet, Patrick Kavanagh observed that, ‘On the stem / Of memory imaginations blossom’. Conflict and peace can be seen as aspects of imagination – cultural, social and political. As this archive took shape the significance of our subtitle – Layers of Meaning – began to unfold. This is socially productive, aspirational, and, potentially, transformative, work. Speaking, listening and preserving are in themselves profoundly humane activities, productive of reflection and the broadening of perspectives and empathy. They break and soften lines. By its very nature we believe that this work helped to build trust, consign the conflict to history and to heal wounds of division within communities and across borders of many kinds.

Developing trust and rapport across conflicted communities is incredibly time-consuming. In this regard we were fortunate to be able to build on the contacts and trust developed in the course of an earlier project on imprisonment. We were fortunate too to have as a resource a very experienced Advisory Committee. This non-executive body assembled twice a year and provided the opportunity to review our work and to receive informed questions. It was a high-powered group, including senior academics, officials, politicians and voluntary and private sector figures. Their comments, deliberations and challenges helped enormously to focus our energies and steer us away from errors. Each representing a particular range of communities and interest groups, they opened doors and stilled scepticism.<sup>2</sup>

And there can be no doubt that the offer of an embargo enabled reluctant witnesses to come forward and persuaded those already on record to speak again – frankly and

2 We would like to record our grateful appreciation to the following individuals: Baroness May Blood, Mr Bob Collins, Mr Jim Fitzpatrick, Sir Nigel Hamilton, Senator Maurice Hayes, Lady Brenda McLaughlin, Mr Liam Maskey, Mr Daithí O’Ceallaigh, Professor Eunan O’Halpin, Sir Joseph Pilling, Mr Trevor Ringland, and Mr Peter Sheridan. The distinguished novelist and short-story writer, Mr William Trevor, served as an honorary member.

for history rather than with the constraint of duty to others in mind, or the politics and pressing concerns of the moment

Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson, MP and MLA, stated:

"I believe this project is very important because it has afforded many people involved in the Peace Process the opportunity for the first time to tell their stories about their personal experiences of the conflict in Northern Ireland. I believe that the anonymity of the project has been important in encouraging people to come forward and to share their personal experiences. Whilst undoubtedly politicians play an important role in the Peace Process, we would not have made the progress that has been achieved in recent years had it not been for the invaluable work that was undertaken in local communities by many courageous people who stepped out of their comfort zone to promote and encourage reconciliation. I believe it is vital for the perspectives to be captured for future generations so that they can learn of the challenges faced by many people across Northern Ireland and beyond as a result of the conflict. We may not agree on our past history but it is important that we come together to create a shared future. Indeed, for reconciliation to occur it is not necessary to agree a shared version of history, but it is vital that we find a way of sharing the present and the future. This project can also play an important part in sharing the lessons of the Peace Process with many others across the world who are emerging from conflict. The stories shared in this project offer hope to those who are still struggling to find peace in their troubled land."

Lord Alderdice added:

"I am very strongly supportive of the idea of capturing these memories while people are still around. What I suppose is important is not just to capture how people lived through the trauma of the Troubles but also what made a peace process possible and how that progressed. There are many people throughout the world who can tell us how they managed to live through conflict, but very few places that have the same experience of finding their way to a resolution through a peace process, so that would be a critical part of the work of this project. We still have issues around about parades and we still have many other things that need to be worked through. This is not a process that is just a matter of the past – this is something that still has to continue on."

Although it was undoubtedly necessary, we were conscious that the restriction of access to the heritage archive was a sacrifice to other researchers and to the current cause of peace and reconciliation. And so we began to ponder how best our skills and expertise might benefit the communities of this island today and in the future.

### **Out of Adversity**

When we came to the category of education we decided to depart from our usual format and to produce open audio-visual interviews. Twelve interviews with teachers,

past-pupils and educationalists from Belfast, Derry, Dublin, Enniskillen and South Armagh provided the basis for a short film on experiences of conflict within schools (*Out Of Adversity*). This was launched jointly by the Northern and Southern Ministers for Education at Trinity College Dublin in May 2013. Encouraged by them and their officials in Belfast and Dublin we went on to develop a resource pack for use in teacher education (including a supporting text on conflict transformation).

### **LOMOND**

Recognising that we had entered a well-trodden field we created an online directory of extant interviews on the Peace Process. These were identified across a range of media – radio, television and print. LOMOND (Layers of Meaning Online Directory) ([www.peaceprocesshistory.org/lomond](http://www.peaceprocesshistory.org/lomond)) was launched at Stormont Castle in June 2011 by the First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland.

This select but authoritative directory of more than 1300 interviews on the Peace Process was drawn together from a swathe of national and international archives. Many of the interviews are with well-known public figures but these are interspersed with hitherto obscure local voices. The directory is fully searchable by key terms and – in the manner of a decades-long time-lapse camera – allows users to access an instructive and suggestive record of the Peace Process – in public styles and statements, sets of possibilities, pressures experienced and insights gained or rejected. To this directory we added the Peace Portal ([www.peaceprocesshistory.org/portal/resources](http://www.peaceprocesshistory.org/portal/resources)), a guided gateway to other relevant online resources on the Peace Process.

### **Blending Academic Work with Community Engagement**

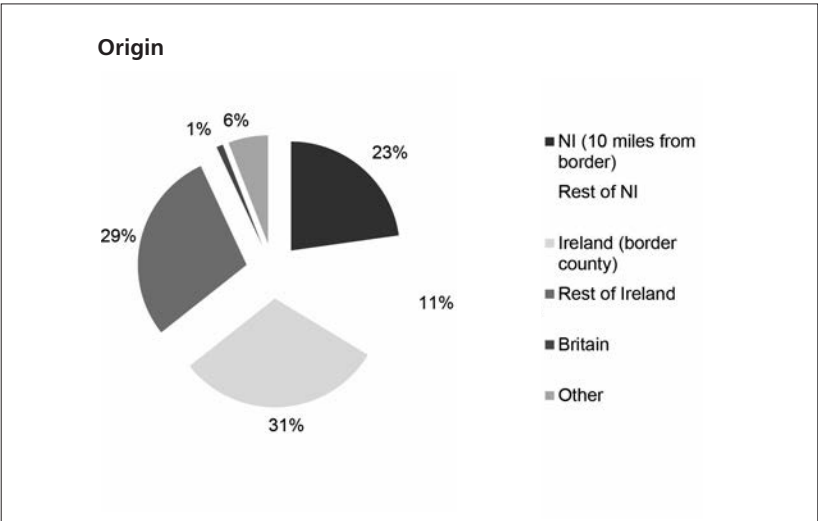
The resources outlined above were largely shaped by academic standards and conventions. The enthusiastic support of Queen Mary, University of London, Trinity College Dublin and Dundalk Institute of Technology was vitally important in assuring interviewees that the enterprise was not tied to the parish pump and that rather it drew on resources that aspire towards historical accuracy, the highest professional standards and an international standing. But working in the shadow of Slieve Gullion we were acutely conscious that we had as much to learn as we had to impart. The border areas in which we developed our local programmes are steeped in lore and learning and there can be no doubt that people here are immensely interested in their local and family history, their neighbourhoods and their immediate historical circumstances. From the outset we knew that to bridge gaps in our perception and knowledge we had to ensure that the project was rooted in real and meaningful community engagement.<sup>3</sup> We were conscious too of our ethical obligations. We wanted to be as far removed as possible from the researcher who parachutes in and moves on regardless. Thus developed the second major component of this project – a programme designed to spawn a carefully selected cohort of interview trainers in the border area.

3 In exploring the potential of wedding academic research to participatory social action we benefited greatly from links with Toynbee Hall, the font of much twentieth century social policy.

**Training Programme**

A three-part training programme was delivered between April and September 2012. It rotated between London, Newry and Dundalk. Participants included nationalist and unionist councillors, members of the Orange Institution, former British soldiers, a former republican prisoner, retired teachers, carers, members of frontline services, youth leaders, victims, local historians and archivists from across the border region, together with students of history, law and sociology from Dundalk Institute of Technology and Trinity College Dublin.

As illustrated below, sixty per cent of the group came from south of the border; thirty-four percent were from the North; and more than half of the total number lived within ten miles of the border.



An anonymous survey revealed that twelve per cent of those from the South had never before visited Northern Ireland and a further thirty-eight per cent had only visited “a few times”.

The age range was broad. Approximately one third (mainly students) were aged 19-25 years old; twenty-seven per cent were aged 26-45; twenty-seven per cent were aged 45-65 and eleven per cent were aged 66-75. The religious background of those from Northern Ireland was mixed but the overall sample was weighted in favour of those from a Catholic background.

It was a risk. At different points we feared that the strong sense of group endeavour might hit a bump and come apart. But it didn't. These people had come to prepare for

a surprisingly delicate endeavour— a ballet on eggshells. They wanted their story and that of their family, townland and fraternity to be preserved. More – they had come to pick up tools and skills to take home for neighbours and colleagues.

Our approach was to focus on the job in hand – providing training in the ethical and legal requirements as well as the necessary conceptual, practical and technical skills to conduct interviews. It goes without saying that one must tread with the utmost care and sensitivity in close-knit and delicately balanced communities. We all know that thoughtlessness – and even a momentary failure to think ahead – can mean that this type of work does more harm than good. This undoubted fact was fundamental to the oral history training programme. Ill-conducted work is not just a waste: it is retrograde, distresses, (could even endanger) and breeds cynicism and resentment. In addition to training these individuals we wanted to ensure that this programme would find its own momentum – that this cohort would have a self-generating impact in border towns and villages – in places of worship and employment, in fraternal and cultural associations, and within community, voluntary and historical organisations.

Desmond Tutu famously noted that: “Reconciliation is not about being cosy, it is not about pretending that things were other than they were. Reconciliation based on falsehood, on not facing up to reality, is not reconciliation at all.” This is undoubtedly true but our experience is that the stout walls that divide us cannot be breached from the front. We thus deliberately avoided ‘truth-kick’ encounters. The main complaint from participants was exhaustion: when not engaged in workshops they were tramping the backstreets of London, witnessing how a variety of communities have engaged with the past. In addition to practical training this deliberately diverse group lodged together, ate together, and got to know one another – away from the tensions and divisions of their home communities and places of worship and work.

One participant observed:

“It quickly became apparent that we were drawn from a deliberately diverse range of backgrounds [...] A major highlight for me was the opportunity to see parts of London that are not on the ‘tourist trail’. We explored problems of conflict and integration in the East End; youth culture; gender discrimination; ethnic divisions; gang activities; and housing and employment concerns in migrant and minority communities. This really opened my eyes to the fact that many communities in London are dealing with similar social problems to ourselves such as bigotry and poverty. It also demonstrated the potential that sensitive interview-based research has for reaching out to others and breaking down communal barriers and stereotypes.”

Her colleague added:

“On the training programme there is a varied range of backgrounds and religions which, through meeting and chatting informally, can open great discussions to

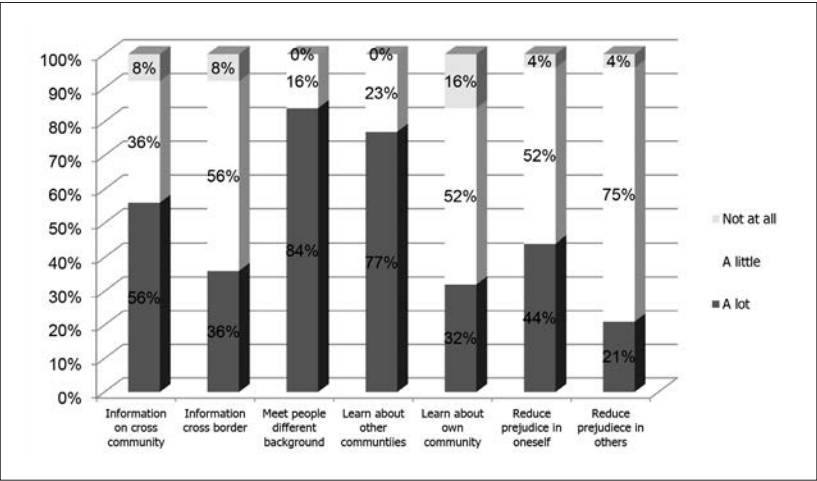


explore and explain about differing situations/views. This programme will help to provide my community with the opportunity to tell its story and to possibly tackle negative perceptions.”

The declared motivation of participants was interesting:

- Improve or acquire interview skills – 92%;
- Improve ability to undertake cross-community research – 91%;
- Improve ability to undertake cross-border research – 86%.
- Access information on a cross-border basis (91%)
- Access information on a cross-community basis (90%)
- Help to reduce prejudice in others (90%)
- Learn more about own community (90%)
- Help to reduce prejudice in oneself (79%).

The table below demonstrates that most participants felt that these expectations had been met.

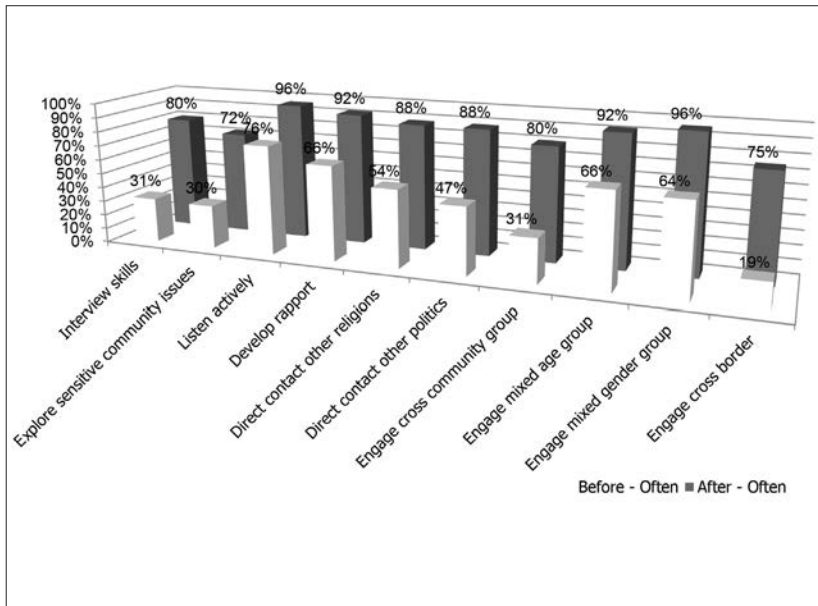


The table on the following page charts the increase in the numbers of participants who stated that they ‘often’ applied the skills and attributes necessary to conduct cross-community or cross-border interview-based research.

These results were encouraging but the real test lay in the deployment of the skills acquired. Upon completion of the training programme, twenty-eight per cent of participants had already started a local project and a further forty per cent had a project in mind but had not yet commenced. Almost half of these projects had a ‘very strong cross-community and / or cross-border element’. Developments in the ensuing

months have been gratifying. Several participants set up training workshops for their host organisations or communities. A retired border resident established a cross-community history programme with a strong story-telling element. He stated: "The training that I received has been invaluable in giving me the confidence and skills to initiate new oral history networks and projects." Two mature students from Dundalk Institute of Technology applied jointly for funding to run a programme entitled 'A New Meaning for Memory'. This project focused on individuals from ethnic minorities and those from deprived socio-economic backgrounds in the border area. Sharon stated:

"Had it not been for the oral history training programme run by the *Peace Process: Layers of Meaning* project I would never have realised how historical texts often neglect people on the margins of society [...] Equally we would never have had the confidence to apply for funding – the skills and techniques we learned gave us great scope in conceiving a project that could be of great benefit to the community. Also the training in how to research and organise a potential project was an invaluable aid, not just for our current endeavours but in the sphere of community development and organisational profiling as a whole."



Finally, a member of a religious congregation significantly expanded her oral history collection with the assistance of volunteers from within the programme.

## Local Projects

Participants on the training programme were invited to submit proposals for exemplary cross-border and / or cross-community oral history projects. In September 2012 three proposals were selected for immediate development: an oral history of cross-border and cross-community co-operation in farming; an intergenerational study of interfaith marriage; and a cross-border exploration of youth identity.

- **Interview-based Exploration of Youth Identity**

Dara Larkin brought together in a series of exploratory meetings and workshops youth groups from Ballynafeigh Community Development Association in Belfast and Craobh Rua House Youth Project in Muirhevna Mór in Dundalk. With due regard for the age and particular sensitivities of participants — he broached issues of identity and diversity. In the course of the workshops the young people put together biographical cameos and portrait photographs. They also interviewed each other and used the material gathered to create a poster publication.

- **Cross-border / Cross-Community Study of the Balmoral Show, Winter Fair and Kings Hall**

Olive Mercer set out to provide an overview of the various shows and exhibitions associated with the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS). Picking up themes of cross-community and cross-border co-operation in farming, her booklet 'Capturing Memories' painted a striking picture of camaraderie and inter-dependency.

- **Intergenerational Study of Interfaith Marriages**

Marie Hamilton meanwhile embarked on an intergenerational study of the impact that mixed marriages have had on both individual and family life since the 1970s. She set out to document changes in attitudes in the course of the last thirty years and thus to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relevant issues.

Marie initially intended to publish the stories exactly as they were narrated to her — warts and all — but this presented numerous methodological and ethical challenges. In the end we found a way to adapt her presentation to enable reflection on what she learned in the course of this highly sensitive project whilst at the same time offering some interim findings.

## The Oral History Training Manual

There is an enormous appetite for interview-based research, stimulated by the astonishing growth in local, family and community history. But as we assembled training materials and reflected upon and sought to use our varied experiences, the need for a plain-speaking training manual presented itself again and again. Some participants on our training programme were seasoned interviewers, but they too required a systematic overview of the methodology and an up-to-date practical guide

in order to continue their work with confidence. We were also regularly approached by other oral history and story-telling groups who wanted to share dilemmas and experiences.<sup>4</sup> We thus put together *Oral History: A Training Manual for Beginners* ([www.peaceprocesshistory.org/resources](http://www.peaceprocesshistory.org/resources)). This was designed to help others to develop training sessions to suit their community's needs and aspirations - with signposts to opportunities for further research and training.

### Peacebuilding

And so to peace. In what ways do these voices and this programme help us more deeply and more generously to understand the past? And in what ways can we claim to have furthered the cause of reconciliation?

In conducting this work we did not see ourselves as peacemakers – but we do believe that our style and methods of work can facilitate the process of peace-making. Dealing with the past is a major issue with political, legal and ethical ramifications. We tried insofar as possible to steer clear of contemporary politics: we operated outside the political realm, not from disdain, but in order to be effective. While laying no claim to complete originality, we hope to have brought a fresh approach to this work – linking our own experience of academic endeavour to social action. The one hundred interviews and the exemplary projects thus together formed an arch. They supported each other and thus defined the project. One gave the work heritage status, historical context, meaning, durability and momentum; the other bestowed authenticity and provided what we hope might be the starting point for a lasting grassroots process.

There was in our interview training programme an implicit test: are memory and legacy issues primarily the concern of a core of enthusiasts and activists, or can they address wider needs? The opportunity was offered, was practical, well-resourced, welcoming and supportive, and the response was reassuringly enthusiastic. People at every level of our society have a story to tell and want to be heard – some want instant exposure, others want to address posterity – to ensure that their grandchildren and great grandchildren understand the lives they lived, their hopes, errors and omissions.

Last year Ambassador Haass invited submissions on ways of dealing with the past. And so we asked how might we gather voices that want and need to be heard, and do so safely – within strong bounds of ethics, law and good practice? Drawing on the lessons of this project we proposed a low-cost franchise-based model. Our aim was to involve as many 'ordinary' people as possible in this work, to operate with as much flexibility as possible, and with minimal organisational structure and constraint.

4 In the course of this project I learned much from my involvement (in an advisory capacity) with a number of interview-based projects. These include: Accounts of the Conflict (INCORE's digital archive of personal accounts of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland); Across the Green & Blue Line (former members of the RUC and An Garda Síochana); Aftermath (assisting victims and their families and those displaced by conflict); Crows on the Wire (documenting the transition from the Royal Ulster Constabulary to the Police Service of Northern Ireland); and the Maze-Long Kesh Story-Capture Committee.

This had to be balanced by considerations of legal and ethical probity and conservative and prudential operation. We proposed a small central operation delivering a well-established, tested, and practical approach, providing training, support, guidance, quality-control and workable methods and task-appropriate equipment.

In our experience much work and significant results can be accomplished by a cohesive and uniform mode of operation; by training trainers; by spotting and taking advantage of gaps and opportunities; by encouraging local and organisational participation; by excluding activities that offer insufficient return; by reducing 'capital' and operational costs; and by ensuring that activity, productivity and zeal are given the necessary direction and quality control and are prudently channelled. Our franchise model was designed to draw up and work to targets; solicit, digest and develop feedback; modify the product to meet changing needs; and offer a corporate identity – a brand.

Working through designated agencies and groups across Northern Ireland and the border areas we proposed to provide training in the skills necessary to conduct interviews on topics relating to the history of living through and with conflict (practical, technical, ethical and legal issues). All participants would ultimately become certified trainers.

We know that such a programme can spawn worthwhile cross-community and cross-border projects. This is a toolkit for dealing with aspects of the past. It is of course not a panacea. Hundreds of families have suffered the ultimate loss. They cry out for accountability and their stories must not be diminished. But exploring the dark recesses of our past calls for Anglo-Irish dynamism, astutely balanced legislation, and considerably more political consensus than we have seen to date. In the meantime other tales can be told – of the democracy of a labour ward, the needs must of a silage shortage, and the odd bolt of lightning that welded and sealed. At times we are restricted to half-truths – to the reality of everyday life. This is both a rational compromise to gather imperfect knowledge and an effective means of assisting the cause of cross-community and cross-border peace building.